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ABSTRACT

This paper reviews the purposes and standards for library and information science journals and then looks specifically at the evaluation process for an Anglophone journal, based in the United Kingdom, of which most of the contributors and readers are from Asia. Part 1, "The Editor's Perspective," addresses the following topics: the purpose of scholarly writing; stylistic trends in scholarly articles, including titles and abstracts, as well as discussion and presentation; editors and referees; criteria for assessment; and refereed articles and professional papers. Part 2, "The Publisher's Perspective," discusses the Literati Club (the MCB University Press network of authors, editors, and editorial board members), PeerNet (an electronic service that is an alternative to the traditional peer review process), and consortia workshops. (MES)

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Library and information science journals in the Asian context

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Abstract

LIS journals fulfil a role as communicators of scholarship and research. To do this effectively they must contain papers that meet international standards, but not necessarily at the expense of possibly unique local considerations. This presentation reviews the purposes and standards of LIS journals and then looks specifically at the evaluation process for an anglophone journal in which most of the contributors and readers are from Asia.

Paper

PART 1: THE EDITOR'S PERSPECTIVE

Introduction

People engage in scholarship and research for a variety of reasons - they may enjoy the detective work it involves, they may be interested in ideas, they may be seeking tenure or promotion. Not often, though, do they undertake these activities for the pure pleasure of writing and being published. Many competent researchers feel quite diffident about their written communication skills, and as a journal editor I am inclined to accept their diffidence as

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well founded.

We who edit journals live with this reality - that many of our contributors are not skilled communicators. And when we work with an anglophone LIS journal whose contributor base uses English as a second or third language, then the problem is compounded.

Purpose of Scholarly Writing

In what follows we review why individuals write for our journals, what they expect in the process, what we as editors ought to be achieving - all in the context of an LIS journal based in the UK but aimed at Asia-Pacific information professionals.

Scholarly or research writing has a number of aims, which may be one of the reasons that contributors find the writing process difficult to sustain. 'Ordinary' writing, say of a piece of fiction, is done to entertain and to tell a story; scholars and researchers, on the other hand, write principally to inform and educate. Such writing, if done well, achieves a number of aims:

- it permits the writer to present new ideas or knowledge to colleagues
- it convinces other scholars/researchers that it is scholarship/research worth consideration in terms of its methodology, analysis and outcomes
- it enables the writer to make sense of what he has discovered, and to place it in the context of a wider body of knowledge.

Achieving these aims comes only with practice, and for the most part it is only the more experienced writer who can juggle them competently. For the individual new to scholarly writing, the process tends to be done from a personal perspective and has an author-oriented approach. The scholar/researcher may understand very clearly what an investigation has found and may feel it is all too obvious to warrant explanation in full. Accordingly, the writing may contain a number of unstated assumptions or may reflect the writer's own thought processes - the reader, in other words, is not a prime consideration. Consequently, the text may neither read well nor follow a recognised organisational style. With experience comes the recognition that writing needs to be reader-oriented in order to achieve clarity and to have an impact.

Writing with a successful reader orientation seems to embody certain key characteristics. In fact across the spectrum of social and human sciences there appear to be three standard conventions that experienced writers follow to ensure wide acceptance of their scholarship (and in Asia these conventions often are overlooked):

- prose should be impersonal and avoid ad hominem arguments
- text should be straightforward and conventional in terms of structure, vocabulary and organisation
- the writing should follow a commonly accepted, logical framework such as introduction, methodology, results, discussion, conclusions.

Impersonal, conventional and logically organised writing may not be exciting, and it may be difficult to achieve, yet it is the best way to communicate effectively, especially for an audience unfamiliar with the subtler nuances of English.

Aside from this matter of fitting the writing to the purpose of scholarly communication it is important that scholars and researchers recognise and take advantage of emerging in the presentation of articles. Two groups of such trends are discussed in the following section.

Stylistic Trends in Scholarly Articles

Titles and Abstracts

For purposes of information retrieval certain parts of articles have gained greater importance in recent years, yet most often require revision in papers submitted by writers in Asia. Here we refer to titles and abstracts.

In terms of retrieval the most useful component of a journal article is its title. In library science literature the title has become very specific and detailed, using focused rather than generic terms. Such titles are far more informative and content-focused than in the past as a means of indicating article content unambiguously.

Almost as important are abstracts, which allow for the fuller description of an article's content than the title; but for some reason very few writers are able to present a good abstract. The norm for writers in Asia is to provide no abstract at all, even when a journal such Asian Libraries requires this as part of the original submission. At the other extreme are those American journals in which the abstract is a mini-discourse, telling us far more than we need to know. In our experience all but the most complex papers can be adequately treated in an abstract of approximately100 words, rarely more.

Discussion and Presentation

Within the body of a scholarly article subtle changes are occurring in three respects - the introduction, the methodological discussion, graphs and tables.

The introductory part of an article should be more than a basic introduction to the topic. In effect it should offer a clear road map of where the paper is going, how it is getting there, and what it will show once one arrives. In this it is a step up the ladder from the abstract, offering more detail and in particular guidance on what one can expect in the ensuing discussion. In many journals the introductory discussions in papers are much improved in recent years, due one suspects to gentle editorial imposition. In my view an introduction needs to be treated as a serious matter, and not just as a 'warming-up' exercise for the writer. If the introduction is well crafted, a reader will be drawn in and will feel more comfortable with the discussion that follows.

There is some tendency in the social sciences for methodology to be treated with less importance than in the past, a trend which is not recommended in LIS. Because we utilise such a range of methods in our discipline, from mathematical formulae to case studies to anthropological ethnographies, the methodology section remains a key to a paper's validity and reliability and therefore cannot be devalued.

Another emerging trend is for increasingly sophisticated graphic and tabular displays, often as a substitute for text. A table is intended to present very precise detail on the results of research; a graph or similar device is intended to express relationships between variables or to display trends in specific factors. However, neither table nor graph should be displayed without full discussion of content and meaning. That is, tabular and graphic data are not a substitute for analysis, but rather complementary means of presentation. Just because computer software allows us to present vivid displays does not mean that we can allow the machine to do our analytical or narrative work for us. Many times referees reject papers that look impressive but contain little meaningful discussion. Analysis, critical engagement with ideas, clear development of arguments - these cannot be replaced by any visual display.

Editors and Referees

One role of a scholarly or professional journal in LIS is to indicate the acceptability of a piece of work by publishing it. This means that a particular paper has been accepted by the professional or scholarly community that the journal represents. For this acceptance to occur all submissions must be evaluated and approved - in other words, there must be some form of quality control. (As an aside, it is this norm of quality control that seems most to incense cybernauts and Internet junkies, who maintain that the great benefit of the Net is its total

democracy, allowing anyone anywhere to 'publish' anything. But some of us do not want to waste valuable time reading sub-standard work; rather, we rely on MCB and other publishers to do the evaluative work for us, to publish work with a recognised imprimatur.)

The emphasis on quality control in an era of burgeoning journal literature and greater specialisation has led to increased reliance on peer review in the West. But this appears not to be the norm in Asian LIS journals. With respect, until a system of peer review is in place and operating rigorously and objectively, no journal can enjoy international standing.

The Editor

Quality control is exercised on behalf of the scholarly community by journal editors and editorial boards (or peer reviewers or referees). The editor is the principal gatekeeper, the one who makes an initial decision about an article, who accepts or rejects. Sometimes the editor alone makes the final decision, but increasingly the editor then confirms his judgment by sending an article that has passed his initial test to one or more referees who may be more expert in the specific topic of the submission. Such refereeing must be 'blind'; that is, the referee must not know the identity of the author or the author's institutional affiliation - another feature that some journals overlook, making their refereeing process somewhat suspect in terms of bias.

The Referee

What characterises a superior referee in a journal based in Asia? 'Based in Asia' is a key phrase, because there are cultural differences that need to be overcome if Asian journals are to meet international evaluative standards. There are four qualities that one should expect to see in a referee:

- competent researcher
- objective assessor
- comparative evaluator

A referee should be a competent researcher who is au fait with trends and developments in his field. This is easier said than achieved in many Asian countries. For example, how many researchers are there competent in English and with access to the latest LIS literature in Myanmar or Vietnam or Bangaldesh?

A referee should be able to make a fair and objective assessment of the methodology employed. This is also easier said than achieved because of the growing divide between quantitative and qualitative research, and the growing volume of the latter. Few Asian-based researchers or academics in LIS have the expertise to make fair judgments of ethnographic research, and one looks to the next generation of Asian LIS researchers to fill this void.

A referee should be able to determine whether a paper is going to give 'value for space' given the growing competition for space in most journals. In the case of Asian Libraries, for instance, the number of submissions has grown 300 per cent in 12 months, yet we are still able to publish only 24 substantive papers (refereed and professional) in a given year.

Referees in Asia, especially those not trained outside Asia, sometimes find it difficult to make these determinations for a host of reasons. In the first place, many have not been trained in the critical reading of published literature. In the second place, many take a less negative view of papers which do not meet the accepted canons of scholarly writing in the West - not a bad thing, incidentally, if this encourages us to take a culturally sensitive view of academic writing (without at the same time sacrificing standards of excellence). Third, Asian scholars are not much given to criticism that smacks of the personal, as this is likely to cause loss of face for the recipient - and may well result in 'payback' at some future date. This, frankly, is behind much of the diffidence one finds among Asian colleagues - but it is still refreshing to be in an

atmosphere where criticism and negativity are not the order of the day, and in this regard we in the West have much to learn.

Criteria for Assessment

What editors and referees do in assessing submissions should be clearly delineated, with the parameters spelled out in no uncertain terms. This means that all of us must have a clear understanding of our assessment criteria.

There is in fact growing concern about suitable assessment criteria for writing by LIS scholars and professionals from different academic backgrounds and with different language skills. One school of thought says the criteria should be international and take no account of national or cultural differences. Another body of opinion suggests that there ought to be different criteria for different groups, for different types of research, for different nationalities. This latter approach frankly leads to confusion and a dilution of the effectiveness of the refereeing process - there are no recognised standards, but rather a series of unique sets of standards.

On the other hand it is markedly unfair to state that a person writing in a foreign language and in a mode for which he was not necessarily trained should be expected to meet the same level of standards as those writing in their native tongue and with the requisite training. It seems more appropriate to use common assessment criteria but perhaps to set the benchmark at a different level, and then gradually raise the level as the contributors become more expert through experience and education. In the latter regard it is worth noting that MCB is one journal publisher among many offering workshops and seminars at conferences such as this not only for editors but also for aspiring authors.

The matter of referee assessment has been discussed by journal editors for a long time, and there has been some interesting research in this area. Lindsey, for example, asked social science referees what they felt were important criteria in submissions and found that 12 criteria mattered, although some with relatively low mean scores. (Lindsey 1978) These criteria are listed in Table 1 in descending order of mean score; it should be recognised that these criteria were suggested by referees of journals in developed Western countries, and they are not necessarily relevant or appropriate for other regions.

Table 1. Importance of Assessment Criteria (Lindsey)

Criterion	Mean score
Value of the findings for advancing the field	5.8
Acceptability of the research design	5.6
Theoretical relevance of the work	5.4
Level of scholarship demonstrated	5.4
Presence of creative ideas	5.2
New empirical evidence	5.0
Sophistication of methodology and analysis	4.3
Relevance of the article to the journal's focus	4.3
Display of ethical sensitivity	4.1
Value of findings for everyday life	2.9
Entertainment value	1.5
Background and reputation of the author	1.3

In our experience these criteria are too extensive for a journal in Asia: some items are not relevant, others are simply unimportant. If we take relevance of a submission to the journal's focus as a given, then there are six criteria that might be viewed as essential in determining the suitability of a submission for publication in an anglophone Asian LIS journal. These are listed in descending order of importance in Table 2.

Table 2. Key Criteria for Assessing Submissions to Asian LIS Journals

- Advancement of knowledge
- New information or data
- Theoretical soundness
- Level of scholarship
- Acceptable research design
- Appropriate methodology and analysis

Why are these the key criteria, and why in this particular order? When we are dealing with regions or countries about which little is known elsewhere, advancement of our knowledge is the key criterion, followed closely by the presence of new data - one more apparent in scholarly writing, the other more evident in research-based writing. Consider, in anglophone countries, how much or how little we know about the information professions in China, Sri Lanka, Bangladesh, Vietnam, Thailand, Japan, Korea - the list is depressingly long. For this reason an anglophone Asian journal has a particular mission to publish new knowledge, new information.

Theoretical soundness and level of scholarship are also placed well up the scale, for writing internationally must be scholarly and well-grounded in theory. In submissions by authors based in Asia, theory and level of scholarship are sometimes difficult to ascertain, but our writers must be encouraged to follow high standards in both respects. Research design, methodology and data analysis are the final criteria, and it is here that many Asian authors seem to be gaining ground most quickly, as they become more aware of research standards and conventions in the West. But for others these criteria remain elusive, and again we editors, referees and publishers have an educational role to perform in teaching writers these skills.

These six points are important because they enable us to answer three questions which are put to the referees in every instance:

- Is the submission a significant contribution in terms of the knowledge or information conveyed?
- Is the submission an original contribution?
- Is the submission sound in terms of methodology, findings and structure?

If we can answer all or most of these in the affirmative, then we have a paper that may warrant publication. Once we have achieved acceptable international standards in these areas we might turn our attention to the much less significant criteria of ethical sensitivity, creativity, author background, etc. But for now these additional criteria are simply not relevant.

Refereed Articles and Professional Papers

Unfortunately, a certain amount of writing by Asian experts simply does not make the grade if we accept the above as reasonable conventions. This may seem a harsh statement, but it is based on some years of personal experience as an editor, as a writer and as a resident of the Asia-Pacific region.

At present there is a tendency for submissions to Asian Libraries to exhibit weaknesses in two major respects: (1) theoretical constructs and research design, (2) structure and writing style. Most worrying are papers falling within the first group. Theory and methodology seem to be sources of weakness in many of the social sciences (Daft 1995), and there is not much that an editor can do to change this, except make constructive suggestions for improvements. A paper submitted to Asian Libraries that is inadequate in terms of either its theoretical base or research design (but not both) may well be published as a professional paper if it contributes to our knowledge of the topic, institution or discipline.

One solution has been to adopt a system of differentiating between submissions of varying characteristics. A poor article is still a poor article and will be rejected as such - as the quality of writing improves in the region, so standards will be raised. In two years with Asian Libraries I have seen this occur, with the result that increasing numbers of papers are being rejected outright. But it is also possible to recognise that a paper submitted as a research article may not make the grade but still be worthwhile in terms of its information content. Therefore, we have introduced two types of papers in Asian Libraries: refereed articles (which are published with a tag indicating that they are in fact refereed), which are principally research based scholarly pieces, and professional papers, which are largely of informational value and describe developments, situations, activities in a place, region or professional sector. In this way we are able to publish valuable information, often from countries about which little is known in the anglophone professional world (e.g. Vietnam, China, Indonesia).

Much less problematic from an editorial standpoint are weaknesses in terms of structure or writing style. As an editor whose first language is English but whose journal is focused on a region where at best English is a second language, we are acutely aware of the unfairness of rejecting an otherwise good paper because of its writing style, grammar, etc. In fact if a paper has worthy content, it seems appropriate to advise the author in considerable detail on how to rewrite the text in standard English, or on some occasions to provide editorial assistance in rewriting. With regard to structure, one's role as editor often involves restructuring a piece so that it reads logically and clearly. One would not do this for an author whose first language was English, of course, and some may object to the double standard. However, I would expect the same courtesy from my Thai or Chinese or Vietnamese colleagues were I able to compose a paper in any of their languages.

The Editor's Conclusion

Scholars and researchers in many Asian countries are seeking publication in the West for a variety of reasons, and one certainly applauds their bravery in approaching journals in Britain, Europe, the USA, Australia and Canada in increasing numbers. Editors are in a privileged position - not only do we make friendships in all corners of the globe, but we are allowed to see work evolve and develop, and to see 'our' writers mature with the experience of having their work assessed. Part of this privilege requires that we be sensitive to the extraordinary difficulties under which many of our contributors work, and that we do what we can to help these individuals improve as scholars and researchers. This does not mean that we apply editorial standards unbendingly but rather that we use the standards sensitively and as a means of training when required.

PART 2. THE PUBLISHER'S PERSPECTIVE

Introduction

We have heard how the editor and editorial team of one LIS journal deal with the difficulties inherent in acting as quality controllers for a publication which is published in the West, but draws its readers and authors from Asia. We have heard how they seek to reconcile the conflicting pressures to meet international standards while being sensitive to local considerations.

Publishers too can play a part. One UK-based serials publisher, MCB University Press, has a number of initiatives which aim to help researchers, lecturers, practitioners and consultants in their quest to get published:

- the Literati Club
- PeerNet

- consortia workshops.

The Literati Club

Literati Club is the MCB University Press network of authors, editors and editorial board members. Among the services it offers are:

- advice on how to get published
- a regular column by Dr Robert Brown of the University of Queensland, who also consults on the skills researchers need to write good articles
- new faces - a venture for first-time authors.

All of these services are available on the Club's Web site at

PeerNet

This is an electronic service which is an alternative to the traditional peer review process. It is currently being piloted on a handful of journals and seeks to introduce democracy and speed to what has traditionally been an elitist and slow process. It is available to editors, authors and conference organisers worldwide.

Benefits for editors are:

- broadens the pool of reviewers available, and conducts the reviewer selections
- provides speedy, structured reviews.

Benefits for authors are:

- shorter time between submission and publication
- structured, informed feedback achieved via the reviewer evaluation
- anonymity of the author and reviewer guaranteed
- promotes meritocracy in the review process

Full details are available at http://www.peer-net.com

Consortia workshops

MCB University Press, like other publishers, has forged agreements with library consortia worldwide. The benefits of electronics are being harnessed to stabilise both the spending of libraries and their own revenue. As part of the service, MCB is conducting workshops for authors 'to overcome the barriers to publication' and to provide resources that will assist them.

Workshops have been conducted this far in South Africa (200 people), Mexico (140) and North America (10), with others planned for Canada, Israel, the Netherlands and North America.

The Publisher's Conclusion

The following points are offered for consideration by editors who are setting up or managing the quality control process of an LIS journal. First, there are several levels of review to choose for your journal:

- editor only
- editor plus second opinion from members of EAB as deemed necessary
- editor plus 1-2 reviewers
- double-blind.

Decide with your publisher which is most appropriate for your particular subject focus and readership.

Second, there are a number of possible criteria for assessing submissions:

- originality
- academic rigour (e.g. sound methodology and appropriate links to the literature)
- practical relevance
- worthwhile conclusions which add to the body of knowledge.

Possible criteria for assessing the accessibility of submissions to the readership:

- clarity of writing
- appropriate use of figures or tables to support the text
- referencing which indicates a grounding in the body of knowledge
- use of notes where appropriate to inform the text.

Again, decide with your publisher what mix of the above is appropriate for your particular subject focus and readership.

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